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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a concise description of procedures used by one teacher to move from a teacher-directed to a child-centered classroom and how this Self-Selection method has made it possible for many American schools to affect a successful transition from the traditional to the open classroom. At the present time, hundreds of teachers throughout Vermont and the United States are involved in varying degrees of Self-Selection. From these people many new approaches, ideas and problems have been generated. A number of the more popular ideas are presented. In addition, several problems which have appeared with this approach are discussed. Among these problems is that of helping the public understand the new role of the teacher and the student. (Author/BW)

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THE SELF-SELECTION CLASSROOM

DOES IT REALLY WORK?

by

Zilpha W. Billings

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THE SELF-SELECTION CLASSROOM--DOES IT REALLY WORK?

The "in" words in education today are innovation and change. Teachers in classrooms across the nation are experimenting with a variety of programs: individualized learning, self-selection classrooms, individual prescription, open classrooms, environmental learning.

The many different approaches are confusing both teachers and parents. Consequently, concerned people are challenging the value of current education and "accountability" has joined the "in" words!

Let's take a look at why education is changing and must forever continue to be adaptable to flexible change!

Thirty years ago, a person could decide on a lifetime career, train for it, then start on a fairly certain future!

Today, a person may find himself prepared for a career that has become obsolete during his years of training!

This rapidly changing job market makes it imperative that schools accept the challenge to educate our young people for successful living in today's world and that the general public be made aware of and helped to understand this educational change.

No longer will basic skills and historical facts alone develop the resourceful citizen, able to retrain himself several times in a lifetime, with expertise, flexibility and freedom from trauma and tension.

Thus, the 3R's that were good enough for father ten years ago, are not now good enough to prepare his child to live with moderate success and happiness in this era of rapid technological development.

What is the "RIGHT" change for education to make?

Teachers who are out front in this quest for education to meet the needs of the "now" generation, know there is no set formula, no one right way! ANY WAY, called by any name, is the right way if it is keyed to fit the strengths and needs of the people involved. Every program is right if students are involved, are

performing in a responsible, self-directed way, are testing hypotheses, selecting alternative options, accepting or rejecting conclusions, continuing to an acceptable degree of decision making and feeling good about the results of the day.

There are many right ways, called many different things, but all of them based on the philosophy of Self-Selection:

> "Each person is unique and has worth, with special strengths and special needs, with individual learning styles, rate of learning and interests, with a special need to know and like himself that he may develop a feeling and concern for all people; that there are certain universal needs of all people (child and adult alike), the need to belong, to achieve, to dream, to command respect, to succeed, to love and be loved."

This is why I would like to share with you my personal quest to develop a learning environment for children that would help them become more independent learners.

How My Search Began

I started my career as a very self-satisfied high school French and English teacher. Having a desire to teach ever since I can remember, I had a vision of becoming, in time, one of the great language teachers!

My focus of interest in education changed with marriage and raising a family. Problems which my children encountered in school started some thoughtful questioning.

As I did much substitute teaching and heard teacher talk in many different schools, I realized it was often centered around problem children--the slow child, the lazy child, the daydreamer, the underachiever, the emotionally disturbed child.

Were our methods of teaching a part of these children's problems?

Due to the teacher shortage, I took over a fourth grade classroom and ran head-on into the problem children I had heard about in the teacher's lounge. Most fourth graders were so innocently eager to learn, so stimulating--all, that is, except a few. These few started more thoughts going round and round. Why, at the age of nine, had some children turned off school, tuned out teachers, become failures before they'd finished elementary school?

As I continued to teach in many school systems through the years the problem

children who could not, or would not, learn became an increasing concern. Questions about methods and materials often ran unanswered through my mind.

Who decided that children learn effectively from the same textbook?

Does every child have to do the same subject at the same time?

Is learning acquired best in a silent classroom?

Why do children move in lines from one place to another?

Can children be trusted to play a more important role in their own education?

How do five-year-olds know so much before they've ever been to school?

How can children develop honesty and responsibility without a place to practice it?

What is a child's self-concept in the "slow" group?

When I questioned children about their turned off, tuned out attitudes on school, they had such reactions as, "afraid of being wrong," "afraid of being laughed at," "afraid of seeming dumb," "afraid of teachers," and "angry at not being trusted."

Were there teaching methods that could enable all children to develop a positive self-image?

Did the classroom situation build all children's self-confidence and self-esteem?

At this state in my questioning I was teaching a sixth grade at Flynn School in Burlington, Vermont, under a fine principal who believed that teachers often had better ideas than the textbook manual and encouraged and supported them in being creative. (There seems to be a direct relationship between a teacher's willingness and ability to make a dramatic change and a principal's confidence and supportive attitude toward her.) It was in this atmosphere that ideas for developing what I later called the Self-Selection Laboratory grew and grew.

As the classroom gradually changed from emphasis on teacher to emphasis on pupil, it was exciting and amazing to see changes in pupils' attitudes toward themselves, each other, and me. It seemed a big step to me when pupils were

freed to select which story they'd read first in a basal reader. It was an even bigger step when they could select which story they would not read in the text. The step to individualized reading was easier as it became evident that boys and girls wanted to read about living--not stories with unreal endings.

I had experienced the satisfying, exciting results of offering to children the opportunity to learn without the pressure to do so at a teacher-set time. So, when the call came from the school administration, "Put ideas into action," I was ready!

I drafted my challenges and questions into a Proposal for Organization of a Self-Selection Laboratory To Be Used by Zilpha Billings in the Sixth Grade at Flynn School, Year 1966-1967. After the superintendent had approved it, I presented it at a public meeting to the school commissioners who also approved it. I was off!

The First Experimental Year

The year began with a completely heterogeneous group of forty sixth graders and a teacher aide. Meetings with parents of the students were arranged early in the school year to explain the Self-Selection concept and how it differed in use of materials and in philosophy of learning. Reaction was extremely favorable. When parents understood that the student's choices were not in the area of whether to work or not, but rather what subject he'd work in at what time and with what materials, with the goals of self-motivation and development of good study habits, they felt safe to let their children try.

Meetings were held with the staff of the school to explain the Self-Selection goals and to ask for their appraisal as the year went on.

Any program which is moving from the safe usual pattern to pioneer in relatively new and unknown areas creates anxiety and fear--fear of failure, fear of what others will think and say. Self-Selection was no exception, but the positive attitudes, concern, and understanding given by all the staff and my teacher aide made this first year a relaxed, fulfilling one.

At orientation workshop as school started, the students and I planned together

to develop an understanding of the privileges, responsibilities, and duties each member must assume. We discussed the role of the teacher as the catalyst, resource person, guide, and friend and the student's role as a unique individual with his special strengths, needs, goals and purposes.

Instruction in the proper use of all media in the classroom was undertaken. Students were helped to acquire procedures for evaluating their own learnings and identifying their own needs.

Curriculum guide lines, established by the teacher, for the areas were presented to each child to help him establish his goals. Because of the wide diversity in students' abilities, care was taken to establish meaningful guide lines within which all children could meet degrees of success each day.

The curriculum was divided into four areas to facilitate maximum use of all materials.

Language Arts - oral and written communcation

Mathematics - the whole broad spectrum of this science

Science - man's place in sciences

Social Studies - a problem approach to man and his world

The materials for all curriculum areas were collected with totally individualized teaching in mind. Consequently, materials covered as wide a range of reading levels as possible, starting with a low fourth and advancing in some cases to college level.

I also prepared a short, concise summary of minimum achievements in each area to help the student find out where he presently was and where he hopefully might want to go. Thus, a student who might be working on fractions in the math area had the following routes he might take: (a) any one of as many math books as I could obtain with a teacher's edition for self correcting; (b) a game dealing with fractions; (c) an electric fraction board; (d) matching equivalent fraction line; (e) solving teacher-prepared, real-life problems dealing with fractions; (f) constructing and putting up a teaching fraction bulletin board; (g) discovering with manipulative fraction pieces; (h) working in a programmed prepared kit on fractions;

(i) working through a visual package of transparencies on fractions; (j) making and solving his own fraction problems; (k) selecting a peer to teach or to be taught by; (l) listening to a tape while watching a filmstrip on fractions; (m) working on a page from a teacher-prepared, programmed math kit. This example typifies our attempt to have many different media for doing the same thing successfully so that each child could find a way which worked best for him.

The room was organized by portable room dividers into four flexible areas: Mathematics, Science, Language Arts, and Social Studies. Within each area the essential materials were kept.

Tables and stacking chairs replaced desks to facilitate free flow in the classroom. This arrangement created an opportunity for independent Self-Selection activities according to the development, needs, and interests of the individual or the group.

Pupils preplanned their day within varying blocks of time according to the evaluation of their needs and interests. Various methods of testing for evaluating were used, such as built-in tests of various programmed material, unit tests, teacher-made tests, pupil-made tests, and standard tests. The evaluative result was arrived at through a flexible arrangement, sometimes by the teacher alone, sometimes by the pupil alone, sometimes together.

The pupils selected the area they worked in, the materials they used there, and the length of time they stayed before moving on to another area. They chose from a wide variety of media the one best suited to meet their needs at the time. Each student worked through his preplanned schedule until he encountered difficulty, then requested assistance. As pupils gradually began to comprehend the actual degree of their involvement in the classroom, changes in the original planning occurred.

Teachers' Appraisal and Involvement

The interest and response of fellow teachers were rewarding, and by the end of the first year Self-Selection was being tried at several levels. As the second year continued, more and more teachers were experimenting with various methods of adaptation.

Teachers who selected to change were both experienced teachers and new teachers, ranging from kindergarten through grade six. The approaches they chose to move into Self-Selection varied with the experience and daring of the individual.

Interested teachers began to collect curriculum material for one area at a time. Since only regular budget money was available for this project, teachers became very creative in finding many ways to reach the same end. They pored through trade catalogues to find more materials to meet children's diverse needs. Books and existing materials were divided among many classrooms. In individualized teaching, materials for no more than six or eight pupils at a time were ever needed in an area. Thus many programmed kits could be equally divided among two or three rooms.

Teachers began to assemble a variety of work sheets from as many sources as possible to set up their own programmed kits. Some worksheets were made into transparencies to use on an overhead projector or at a child's seat; others were covered with X-ray film or laminating film to be written on directly and then erased. Each kit, when prepared, provided many levels of non-consumable, sequential-skill-development practice sets to fit the needs of all children in the class.

When enough materials were collected in the area a teacher felt most comfortable in, the change was talked over with the students and Self-Selection began. When a small beginning had occurred, the evolvement into total Self-Selection seemed inevitable, for it was rewarding to see busy, happy children working in a challenging, responsible manner.

New Approaches, Ideas and Problems

At the present time, hundreds of teachers throughout Vermont and the United States are involved in varying degrees of Self-Selection, from the teacher who is experimenting in one curriculum area, to the teacher who has become a master in the field of Self-Selection.

From these people many new approaches, ideas and problems have been generated. Some popular ones follow:

* Printed schedules prepared by the teacher and hand written schedules prepared by the student exist side by side in many classrooms according to a particular child's ability to preplan. The teacher-made schedule may be the first small step of a child toward independence in planning his day.

* Schedules, using symbols and simple words, can be adapted to help a child of any age organize and plan a worthwhile day.

* Whole group activities and teaching are a vital part of the Self-Selection classroom. It is here that social skills are developed to help a child get along with others.

* There are a flexible number of curriculum areas in a room according to the interest and needs of the group working there.

* A special responsibility of the teacher is to generate a new, big idea, problem or question daily which will extend the thinking and research skills of some child. Necessary skill development can become deadly unless the teacher as a catalyst makes each day exciting, challenging and different.

* Each teacher develops in a different way, at a different speed, with different materials. She, too, has special strengths and special needs. A basic need is a security to try a new approach without fear of failure. There needs to be an openness in the relationship of the total school staff with everyone working toward a common goal; a better life for the people involved.

Problems

The busy, noisy hum of such a classroom is tiring though stimulating. A possible solution is a "tranquil time" when everyone reads, dreams or works on an individual project until flagging energies are renewed.

** How to keep records so the student and the teacher knows what's been done and what comes next.

Make a grid with spaces on the left side for alphabetical listing of students' names, a space on the top for labeling and numbering or color coding. Use them for recording in all individualized material. Very young children can

learn to color the right square, thus seeing accomplishment and saving teacher-time.

** How to help the public understand the new role of the teacher and the student.

Arrange various activities for the public to visit school in a non-threatening atmosphere. Try a "Holiday Walk-Through" from six to nine at night when the children bring their family, relatives and friends to tour the school. Encourage questions and honest criticism. Explain present methods and materials in lay terms. Remember parents are the child's first teacher. Their concerns are normal and right.

** The threatening sound of accountability.

Good teachers have been accountable long before accountability became an "in" word. What does it mean? It means that children and teachers have a direction and preplanned goals; that they pretest to find out what is known, practice on needed areas and post test to assess what new prescription is needed; that sensible, comprehensive record keeping be used to graphically establish where a child has been, where he is now, and where he should go.

** Loneliness associated with the cutting edge of innovation and change.

New approaches should be started with one or more people to share the glory of success and the devastation of failure. Hopefully, there will always be failures which will lead on to new experimentation and flexible change.

Self-Selection Classrooms Have Common Values

As I move from classroom to classroom where Self-Selection is being used, I see many common values which I believe are important to children as they seek new knowledge and skills. Let me share these with you in closing.

** Atmosphere Is Relaxed and Happy

Visitors frequently comment on the relative quietness of the room. Thirty or more youngsters working independently, communicating their own ideas freely, do so with the low busy hum of a well-organized bee-hive. This analogy is appropriate as the teacher uses the "hum" level as a barometer to measure productive activity.

In the words of a child, "In this school, you can look forward to an adventure

every day. I've never really despised school but I can't say I've ever really looked forward to going until Self-Selection. On the way to school, instead of thinking about the lesson we'll be getting or what I'll do at recess, I think about what I'll do when I get to class, and I really look forward to coming."

** Instructional Grouping Is Flexible

Teachers vary their instructional approach according to their own special concerns and the needs and abilities of their students. Large group instruction and participation occur when they prove to be more effective than individual instruction. Grouping in Self-Selection may be teacher or student initiated to meet a particular goal. No permanent grouping occurs as each child works at his own rate and level, which changes rapidly from day to day and week to week.

** Individualized Reading Is Used

Individualized reading is used to help each child reach his potential. Mini-books, made by taking apart basal readers and color coding a paper cover for each story according to reading level, allow each child on any level to read a book the first day of school. Nothing else builds positive attitudes better than success.

** Curriculum Materials Are Carefully Selected

As often as possible, materials are self-directing to let a student feel his own inner strength, self-correcting to immediately reinforce correct work habits and to help him assess his need to ask for help.

** Pupils Organize Their Day

Children on the primary level work with a weekly schedule in planning their day. During a pupil-teacher conference reasonable goals are set for daily achievement. As the teacher and pupil plan and evaluate progress together, signals are worked out to help the student keep his goals in mind. (A red dot in front of a subject heading is such a warning signal.) A child must be helped to determine what he ought to learn. When a tendency to avoid an important area occurs consistently, the pupil will be helped to understand its value and encouraged to undertake it through an avenue of his own interests and concerns.

Intermediate-level children accept the responsibility of writing their own schedules each day. The teacher offers exactly as much help as each pupil needs in order for him to become proficient in this. The degree of his success in planning a good day is directly related to the degree of his responsible production.

** Heterogeneous Grouping Is Used

Each level is deliberately grouped heterogeneously according to chronological age to simulate a mini-world, where real-life problems arise and can be handled under the alert guidance of the teacher.

** There Is Time for the Individual

There is time in a day for a child to think new thoughts uninterruptedly, to envision unknown frontiers, to create in a style peculiarly his own, to question established ideas and facts, to decide who he is and what he is in his world.

Now, if you agree that:

1. all children can and want to learn,
2. all children can identify real purposes for learning,
3. all children can learn to identify their needs,
4. all children can be self-directing in their learning,
5. all children can learn to evaluate their own learning,

Then, Self-Selection may really work for you!

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